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ABSTRACT

Punctuation contributes substantially to the effectiveness of a piece of writing, and its successful use calls for an awareness of the sound of written language. For centuries, debates have existed over whether punctuation is determined by grammar, or whether its primary function is to signal the "prosody"--the patterns of pitch and stress and hesitations--that authors intend and that readers attribute to a piece of writing. One reason for the inconclusiveness of these debates is the fact that prosody and grammar often support each other. Much 19th-century writing included punctuation that was not in accord with grammatically based rules. However, other literature (for example, certain unpunctuated sequences in James Agee's "A Death in the Family") shows how punctuation, or the lack of punctuation, does not reflect the way the writing sounds. These styles of writing are distinguished by the degree to which their punctuation captures the prosody of the inner voice. Reading aloud can make the inner voice overt by turning written language into spoken language, but whereas reading aloud is subject to various physical and psychological constraints, the inner voice is not. In teaching writing, the importance of listening to what is written should be stressed. In addition to being sensitized to their inner voices, students can benefit from knowing the range of available punctuating options. (Five references are appended.)
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WHAT GOOD IS PUNCTUATION?

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WHAT GOOD IS PUNCTUATION?

by

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There are few people whose heart will skip a beat at the thought of punctuation. For sheer excitement, punctuation ranks well below spelling, which at least lends itself to interesting games and contests. At best, it seems to be a necessary evil. Since it is present in all normal English writing, anyone who is going to write English needs to learn to use it in an acceptable way, but it is seldom mentioned as an important ingredient of good writing. Interestingly, in the early 19th century those in the printing profession believed they knew more about how to punctuate than their authors did. A book called *The Printers' Manual* published in London in 1838 "laments the ignorance of most writers in the art of punctuation and fantasizes about a world in which authors turn in manuscripts with no punctuation at all, leaving that chore to the professional competence of the compositors" (Shillingsburg, 1986, p. 60).

Even if we might now be willing to admit that punctuation is not exactly in a class with setting type, and that authors are best allowed to have some control over it, it continues to suffer from a popular reputation as something that is arbitrary, unmotivated, and governed by rules that make no particular sense. In short, it is in a class with "grammar." Perhaps it is even a part of grammar, but certainly not one of the more interesting parts.

There is a centuries old debate over whether, or to what extent, punctuation is in fact determined by grammar, or whether its primary function is rather to signal the "prosody" -- the patterns of pitch and stress and hesitations -- that authors have in mind when they write and that readers attribute to a piece of writing. Prosody is an obvious property of *spoken* language, where it takes only a moment of listening to confirm the presence of pitch changes, stresses, and hesitations. But what could it mean to say that these same features are present in written language too? Is not writing something that we see, rather than hear?

Some who have reflected on their own personal experiences in reading and writing have concluded that written language does actually involve a mental image of sound. Just as people can imagine what some familiar piece of music sounds like, readers and writers seem to be able to imagine how writing sounds. Eudora Welty, in her autobiographical book *One Writer's Beginnings*, put it this way: "Ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn't *hear*. As my eyes followed the sentence, a voice was saying it silently to me. . . . My own words, when I am at work on a story, I hear too as they go, in the same voice that I hear when I read in books. When I write and the sound of it comes back to my ears, then I act to make my changes. I have always trusted this voice." If we can assume that Welty's observations capture something real and important, then the ways writers manage prosody can have an important effect on their writing.

To return to the debate over whether punctuation reflects grammar or whether it has more to do with the prosody of this inner voice, one reason for the inconclusiveness of the debate is the fact that, in the majority of cases, prosody and grammar support each other. Whether the period at the end of a sentence means, "This is the end of a sentence" (signalling something grammatical), or whether it means, "This is where there is a falling pitch and a pause" (signalling something prosodic) may be difficult to decide, since usually both things are true. There are some cases, to be sure, where grammar dictates the presence or absence of punctuation, whereas prosody does the reverse. When one looks at such cases in actual writing, one finds that sometimes grammar has its way, sometimes prosody. There is no clear answer to which predominates, but it is prosody that gives expression to that inner voice.

If we listen a little more carefully to spoken language and its prosody, we find that it is typically produced in brief spurts, each showing a coherent pitch contour and usually followed by a pause. (For more on these spurts and their significance, see Chafe, 1987a.) It is of some interest that these spoken "intonation units" are nicely reflected in the punctuation units of much good writing. (By "punctuation unit" I mean the stretches of language that are separated by punctuation marks.) Notice how Herman Melville used commas, semicolons, and periods to create this effect in *Moby Dick*. I have written the punctuation units on separate lines to emphasize their nature:

(1) The prodigious strain upon the mainsail had parted the weather-sheet,
(2) and the tremendous boom was now flying from side to side,
(3) completely sweeping the entire after part of the deck.
(4) The poor fellow whom Queequeg had handled so roughly,
(5) was swept overboard;
(6) all hands were in a panic;
(7) and to attempt snatching at the boom to stay it,
(8) seemed madness.
(9) It flew from right to left,
(10) and back again,
(11) almost in one ticking of a watch,
(12) and every instant seemed on the point of snapping into splinters.

This example typifies much 19th-century writing by including instances of punctuation that are not in accord with grammatically based rules. Most obvious is the fact that the commas at the ends of lines 4 and 7 separate a subject from a predicate, where conventional grammar would not countenance such a separation. But if one thinks of how this passage *sounds* as one reads it to oneself, and presumably as Melville imagined it to himself, the punctuation quite plausibly reflects his prosodic intentions.

Other literature, however, provides us with many examples where punctuation, or the lack of it, seems not to reflect the way the writing sounds. Take, for example, the following long unpunctuated sequence from James Agee's *A Death in the Family*, where a reader may have some difficulty restraining the impulse to insert a few prosodic boundaries:

> He has been dead all night while I was asleep and now it is morning and I am awake but he is still dead and he will stay right on being dead all afternoon and all night and all tomorrow while I am asleep again and wake up again and go to sleep again and he can't come back home again ever any more but I will see him once more before he is taken away.

Doubtless Agee was trying to achieve an effect of breathlessly tumbling, silent ideas. That kind of effect, however, is possible only in writing, and it removes writing from the link with spoken prosody that is so clear in Melville.

The Melville and Agee examples were produced about a hundred years apart, but we can easily find examples of contemporary writing that differ in similar ways. To illustrate with two extremes, there is a marked contrast between the punctuation of the text of a recent automobile advertisement in *Time*:

> Town road.
> The longest straightaway on the course.
> The 16-valve,
> intercooled,
> turbocharged engine,
> capable of doing 130 and more on a test track,
> reaches its mandated maximum of 35 mph and purrs nicely along at that speed.

and the punctuation of a recent scholarly article regarding "paleodemography":

> Persons familiar with the problems inherent in the estimation of demographic parameters for living human groups characterized by small size and a lack of census records should scarcely be surprised to find that paleodemography is controversial.

We can see, then, that writers of different periods as well as of different contemporary styles use punctuation in different ways. Is this because their prosodic intentions are so different, or is it because they differ in the degree to which they make use of punctuation to express their intentions? Both factors undoubtedly play a role, but I will focus here on the second: the assertion that styles of writing are distinguished by the degree to which their punctuation captures the prosody of the inner voice.

Putting things in this way implies that we can have some independent knowledge of the prosody of the inner voice, so that we can compare it with a writer's punctuation in order to determine whether that punctuation expresses it well or badly. But how can we know about the inner voice except through punctuation? One way to make it overt might be through reading aloud. In a sense, reading aloud turns written language into spoken language, giving it a prosody that anyone can hear. To see what a systematic investigation along these lines would offer, we listened to tape recordings of a number of people reading aloud various passages of different styles (see Chafe, 1987b, for further details). It was found that they divided the passages into intonation units much like those of normal speech, regardless of how the passages had been punctuated. For example, the Agee passage was divided in the following way by most oral readers:

> He has been dead all night,
> while I was asleep,
> and now it is morning,
> and I am awake,
> but he is still dead,
> and he will stay right on being dead,
> all afternoon,
> and all night,
> and all tomorrow,
> while I am asleep again,

and wake up again,
and go to sleep again,
and he can't come back home again,
ever any more.
But I will see him once more,
before he is taken away.

The average length of these intonation units was just under five words. Five or six words is the typical length for intonation units in ordinary spoken English.

If oral readers create intonation units much like those of speech, regardless of how a passage was punctuated, they show us the degree to which an author punctuated in a spoken-like way. Thus, the automobile advertisement quoted above could be said to be very spoken-like in its punctuation, whereas the Agee passage was very unspoken-like in this respect. Reading aloud can also show associations between specific punctuation marks and specific pitch contours. For example, periods are almost always read aloud as falling pitches (suggesting the end of a declarative sentence), whereas commas are usually read aloud as non-falling pitches (suggesting that more is to follow).

But it is not necessarily the case that people read something aloud the same way they read it to themselves. Reading aloud is subject to various constraints, both physical and psychological. A speaker has to breathe, for example, and there is a practical limit on how fast one can say something. There seem also to be some mental limitations on the speed with which one can process speech. The inner voice of written language may be freer of these constraints, with the result that more can be included in a written punctuation unit than in a spoken intonation unit. We asked some other readers, instead of reading these passages aloud, to "repunctuate" them, that is, to insert their own punctuation into versions from which the original punctuation had been removed. These repunctuated versions showed us the extent to which the authors had punctuated in ways their readers regarded as appropriate. They also provided clues as to how readers chose between the dictates of grammar and prosody.

The difference between those who read the passages aloud and those who repunctuated them can be illustrated with a brief excerpt from Henry James (taken from *The Turn of the Screw*). James wrote at one point:

We were to keep our heads if we should keep nothing else--

Most of the people who read this little excerpt aloud, in spite of the fact that they were looking at the original punctuation, inserted a prosodic boundary after the word "heads." That is, they read it as if the punctuation had been:

We were to keep our heads, if we should keep nothing else--

In splitting this fragment into two six-word segments, these oral readers were adhering to the five or six word limit of spoken intonation units. But the silent readers who repunctuated this passage, even though they did not see the original punctuation, agreed with James: most of them left the passage whole.

Why did both James and his silent readers prefer a punctuation unit 12 words long, twice the normal length of a spoken intonation unit? They probably were not just being slaves to punctuation rules. In another study writers were found to insert commas

before subordinate clauses about 40% of the time (Chafe, 1984). Probably it is relevant that very little in this excerpt was "new," in the sense of information being brought up for the first time. Just before this James had written:

> . . . we were of a common mind about the duty of resistance to extravagant fancies.

To then write "we were to keep our heads" was to repeat the idea of "resistance to extravagant fancies," clarifying and reinforcing it by wording it in a different way. And then to add "if we should keep nothing else" was only to emphasize the resolve by saying that this was the one essential thing to do. The passage in question does little more than strengthen an idea that had already been expressed in the passage before it. In writing, it seems that passages which express little in the way of new information can be all of a piece. Silent readers can absorb them without the need to split them apart. Speakers, locked into the more rigid requirements of spoken language, are more comfortable with a prosody that keeps things shorter. If, among the silent readers, some wish to follow a more leisurely pace, they are free in this example to interpret the conjunction "if" as a prosodic boundary in their own inner prosody. But neither James nor most of his readers saw any need to make this option explicit by inserting a comma.

What does such a study suggest with regard to the teaching of writing? Above all, it suggests how important it is for writers to pay attention to their inner voices. Good writers, whether or not they realize it, *listen to what they write*. They listen while they are writing, and even more importantly they listen while they are reading what they wrote in order to make changes. Paying attention to the sound of written language is absolutely essential to the effective use of punctuation.

It may be a little harder to be a writer these days than it was in the days of Thoreau and Melville. Then, writers were skilled in imagining how something would sound if it were read aloud, and they punctuated accordingly. The trick was to use punctuation marks as if they were stage directions for effective oral presentation. Whether or not those authors specifically intended their works to be read aloud, they punctuated as if that were their intention.

Reading aloud is not so much in fashion any more, nor is punctuation that is based on what reading aloud would sound like. If, as is currently assumed, most reading is going to take place silently and rapidly, more language can be assimilated within single acts of comprehension. A result is the current tendency for longer punctuation units, and for leaving more of the prosodic interpretation up to the reader, allowing the grammar to give prosodic options. This is the style often referred to nowadays as "open" punctuation.

Contemporary writing actually exhibits a broad variety of punctuation styles, so that accomplished writers need to be able to punctuate in ways that are appropriate to whatever kinds of writing they may be doing. An advertising copy writer who punctuated like a professor would soon be out of work, and a professor who punctuated like a 19th-century novelist would find journal editors deleting commas right and left.

Students, in addition to being sensitized to their inner voices, will benefit from knowing the range of punctuating options that are available, and from being shown, through examples, what is most appropriate to one style and another. They can learn from practice in writing advertising copy as well as the more academic kinds of

exposition, and from experimenting with fiction that mimics the very different punctuation styles of, say, Melville and Agee. At the same time, developing writers need to know that there are certain specific rules for punctuating that violate the prosody of their inner voices, and that simply have to be learned. These arbitrary rules are few in number and well defined, and to learn them need be no burden. The rules themselves may be appropriate to some styles and not to others. For example, the rule against placing a comma between a subject and predicate, violated so often by 19th-century writers, was also safely ignored by the person who wrote the following for the outside of a cereal box:

> Two cups of Quaker 100% Natural Cereal mixed with a little of this and a little of that, make the best cookies you've tasted in years.

The bottom line is that punctuation contributes substantially to the effectiveness of a piece of writing, and that its successful use calls for an awareness of something that is, for this and other reasons, essential to good writing: a sensitivity to the sound of written language.

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